



ARMENIAN ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF SEBASTIA

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The art and architecture of Armenians in Sebastia must be conjured up through the historical imagination, for only a fraction of it still survives. While the region was populated continuously by Armenians from antiquity to 1915, the hands of time and of humans have laid waste to most of their monuments. The Armenian churches and monasteries, produced when Sivas was known as Sebasteia or Sebastia in Lesser Armenia (Pokr Hayk), once numbered more than forty. Now, most have been altered beyond recognition, or worse, razed to the ground. Numerous manuscripts produced in the area have been lost, while those that survive have found their way to the quieter confines of libraries and museums in Armenia, Jerusalem, Europe, and America.¹ This survey will consider a part of the remaining evidence, concentrating on artistic production in the eleventh and seventeenth centuries, including church architecture and manuscript illumination. Like the historical texts used by other contributors to this volume, these works are primary sources, providing an alternate but equally eloquent testimony to the centuries-long vivacity of the Armenian community of

¹ For more information on these collections, see the following catalogues: *Hay manrankarichner: matenagitutyun IX-XIX dd.* [Armenian Miniature Painters: Bibliography, 9th-19th Centuries], ed. Astghik Gevorgyan et al. (Erevan: Matenadaran, 1998); *Armenian Art: Treasures of Jerusalem*, ed. Bezalel Narkiss et al. (New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas, 1979); Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *Armenian Manuscripts in the Walters Art Gallery* (Baltimore: Walters Art Gallery, 1973); idem, *Armenian Manuscripts in the Freer Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1963); Thomas F. Mathews and Roger S. Wieck, *Treasures in Heaven: Armenian Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York: Pierpont Morgan Library, 1994).

Sebastia.²

The first physical evidence for an Armenian artistic tradition in Sebastia dates to 1021, when Senekerim-Hovhannes, the last Armenian king of Vaspurakan, participated in a territorial exchange with the Byzantine emperor Basil II. In this transaction, Senekerim ceded his original kingdom to Byzantium, receiving in return Sebastia and its environs. Sebastia thus became home to the displaced Armenian king and to waves of emigrating Armenians. Not long after came the construction of several churches and monasteries.

One of the most important of these, the Monastery of Surb Nshan (Holy Sign or Cross) was founded by Senekerim or one of his descendants.³ As with so many medieval monuments in the area, Surb Nshan underwent several restorations—in the mid-sixteenth, the eighteenth, and the nineteenth centuries. It was abandoned in 1915 during the Genocide and destroyed completely in the 1980s. Surviving records, however, provide an idea of the original complex (Fig. 1). The main church was rectangular in layout with massive buttressing piers under the dome. In the nineteenth century, as part of a restoration effort, the interior was whitewashed and the walls and floor were decorated with the famous tiles of Kutahia, a practice common to both medieval Christian and Islamic architecture in the Middle East.

Originally, Surb Nshan held very specific ties to Greater Armenia. Medieval sources report that Senekerim brought to the

² For a historical overview and bibliography of the architecture of Sebastia, see *Armenian Architecture: A Documented Photo-Archival Collection on Microfiche for the Study of Armenian Architecture*, a multi-volume microfiche collection of Armenian monuments (Zug, Switzerland: Inter Documentation, 1980-1990). The set, which is available in a number of American research libraries, was created under the direction of Vasken Parsegian, with a foreword by Oleg Grabar and edited and written by Krikor Maksoudian and Lucy Der Manuelian. For the region of Sebastia, see vol. 6, fiche A-3109. Specific references to *Armenian Architecture* will be indicated hereafter by microfiche number.

³ Surb Nshan functioned as the residence of the prelates of Sebastia, including a pupil of Grigor Magistros, Eghishe, who lived in the mid-eleventh century. For a brief time in the thirteenth century, the monastery actually served as the Holy See of the Armenian Church. For further information on this site, as well as bibliographical references, see *Armenian Architecture*, A-3109, pp. 7-16.

site a relic of the Holy Cross from the Monastery of Varag in Vaspurakan, his homeland. Also called Surb Nshan, this monastery was, in a sense, the parent foundation for the new complex in Sebastia. Sharing a relic and a dedication, the two foundations also seem to feature similar architectural layouts. Neither of the structures survives in sufficient repair to permit a conclusive comparison; however, if only from plans, one can detect significant resemblances. This is particularly true when considering the Sebastia church (Fig. 2) against the southernmost and oldest church of Varagavank, which probably dates to the tenth century.⁴ Although slightly smaller in measurement, the Sebastia church also possesses a long, rectangular, domed space, large wall piers, and a pair of side chapels flanking the apse. What this importation shows is the close attachment to traditional architectural forms of Greater Armenia, a character of Armenian culture that survives to the present day.

While little more can be surmised about the medieval architecture of Sebastia, manuscript painting allows us to make more substantial observations. Codices produced in and around Sebastia survive in abundance, and many of them are held in American collections. Although scriptoria existed in the area from the eleventh century onwards, the majority of extant manuscripts date from the seventeenth century, when the region was under Ottoman rule. Among them are fine examples of painting that comprise an important chapter in the history of Armenian illumination.

One such manuscript is a Gospel located in the Spencer Collection of the New York Public Library.⁵ Bound with silver covers from Kesaria (Kaiseri), it includes canon tables and several miniatures of full and half-page size. The book was left unfinished and unfortunately no colophon accompanies it.⁶ Nevertheless, the narrative cycle was quite developed. The

⁴ See Jean-Michel Thierry and Patrick Donabédian, *Les art arméniens* (Paris: Mazenod, 1987), p. 588, fig. 870. A brief description of the site and further references appear on pp. 586-88 of the same publication.

⁵ For more commentary on this manuscript, see Mathews and Wieck, *Treasures in Heaven*, cat. 56, pp. 187-88.

⁶ This can be determined from the canon tables, from which the index entries are missing.

Gospel of Matthew begins with a full-page scene of the Nativity, featuring the Virgin and Child within an elaborate composition, approached at the right by the Magi bearing gifts and from above by the ox and ass. Over the group fly angels in what appears to be a highly stylized landscape (Fig. 3). As is characteristic of late medieval Armenian miniatures, space and form are defined not by modeling and perspective as much as by elaborate patterning, and depth is conveyed by stacking forms on top of each other. The bright color palette distinguishes Armenian painting from the manuscript art of neighboring Byzantium. The Baptism shows similar interest in patterning, seen in the treatment of the hilly landscape and in the lively contrast of deep blues and reds. Particularly notable in the full-page miniatures is a scene of Christ's Presentation in the Temple. Here, elements of late medieval architecture, of both the Armenian and Islamic tradition, can be witnessed in a ciborium sheltering the figures, with its intersecting arcade (Fig. 4).

Perhaps more interesting are the inter-textual scenes, which focus on Christ's miracles. In the scene of Christ Walking on Water, for example, a full length Christ stands to the left of the composition, facing a boat of surprised apostles (Fig. 5). This layout is similar to an image in a thirteenth-century Cilician manuscript of Toros Roslin now located in the Walters Art Gallery.⁷ Affinities can also be found in a comparison of the scenes of Christ healing the Woman with an Issue of Blood. Further, both are accompanied with an illustration of the servant of Jairus on the opposite page.

The correspondences between the two manuscripts are probably no accident. Sebastia was home to some of the most important Armenian scriptoria during the late Middle Ages, and one of its prized possessions was the Cilician manuscript executed by Toros Roslin that was previously mentioned.⁸ Brought to Sebastia in the 1470s, the manuscript was apparently seized by Muslims and then ransomed around 1602.

⁷ Ms 539 in the Walters Art Gallery, folio 68 recto. The image is reprinted in Der Nersessian, *Armenian Manuscripts in the Walters Art Gallery*, plate 53, fig. 73.

⁸ For further commentary, see Der Nersessian, *Armenian Manuscripts in the Walters Art Gallery*, pp. 10-12.

This manuscript provided the model for a number of seventeenth-century works, and perhaps the finest of all is the Gospel located in the Freer Gallery in Washington, DC.⁹ Fortunately, the manuscript contains a colophon dating its production to 1668-73. The text also reveals the name of the scribe, Mikayel, who was responsible for the illuminations. He produced it in the town of Nor Avan or Nor Kaghak, near Sebastia, at the behest of the *mahtesi* (pilgrim) Markos, a miller.¹⁰ Interestingly, Mikayel refers to his Cilician model specifically in the donor page, where he appeals to God on behalf not only of the patron but also for the "excellent scribe Toros surnamed Roslin, the illuminator of the model."

The text begins with a set of Canon Tables prefaced by the letter of Eusebius to Carpianus. Lavishly decorated and illuminated, the customary architectural frame is enlivened with bright patterned colors and gold paint (Fig. 6). This frame, as well as the trees and flowers decorating the margins, are inhabited by peacocks, partridges, lions, and fantastical beasts. In the arch is Eusebius himself, gray-haired and gesturing actively to his scroll. The opposite page with Carpianus is similarly decorated, featuring an elaborate architectural frame, birds, and trees. On this folio, lions and gazelles chase each other around the spandrel of the arch. A vivid palette and ample gold paint contribute further to the liveliness of the scenes.

The pages reveal that Mikayel was a master of painterly technique. A detail from the canon tables provides a sense of the delicacy of the artist's line, evident in the articulation of the wings and feathers of a marginal bird (Fig. 7). As this detail also indicates, the manuscript has suffered some damage, both through the cropping of the pages, which is generally undertaken when the edges become very worn. The gold paint has also flaked considerably.

The following canon table page is equally ornate and presents, in almost every way, a close copy of Roslin's thirteenth-

⁹ Freer Gallery, Ms 36.15. For further examination of this extraordinary manuscript, see Der Nersessian, *Armenian Manuscripts in the Freer Gallery*, pp. 92-93.

¹⁰ For further information and bibliography on the artist, see Der Nersessian, *Armenian Manuscripts in the Walters Art Gallery*, p. 65.

century manuscript.¹¹ Even a brief comparison exhibits correspondences on all levels, from general compositions to details, style, and palette. Nevertheless, Mikayel has taken the liberty to make the scene more lively, bending the trees to create seating for additional birds, enlarging the marginal animals, and brightening the rather austere faux marble of Roslin's columns with diagonal stripes. Mikayel's work represents a formidable achievement. It is rare to find such a close copy without any stiffness or hesitancy, and Mikayel's hand is tremendously self-confident. As one can see in the marginal figures, the strokes are strong and assured, appearing more as original inventions than carefully observed copies.

The dedication pages of the manuscript are some of the most sumptuous of the book (Fig. 8). There, Mikayel has again copied his model faithfully, using, for example, the same technique of backing the text in a thick layer of gold leaf.¹² He has also made some changes, complicating the margins with birds and trees, and, interestingly, omitting the red and blue paint in the inscription. It is noteworthy, moreover, that Mikayel did not pass the writing of the manuscript text to a scribe, as was common in the Middle Ages. Like Roslin himself, Mikayel both copied and illuminated the pages. One can see the advantages of this method in the way the *bologir* script echoes the delicate lines of his artistic compositions. As a highly talented scribe as well as an illuminator, Mikayel was able to create a harmonious page, in which shapes of figures, such as the beak of a swan, follow the same angles as the letter forms of the text.

Among the full page illustrations is a magnificent Ascension featuring an enthroned Christ in a blue mandorla lofted into midair by angels (Fig. 9). Below stands the Virgin, in a gesture of wonder and prayer, flanked by the awestruck Apostles. The whole composition, permeated with gold paint and deep, rich pigments, is again modeled on Roslin's Ascension.¹³ Another

¹¹ Walters Art Gallery, Ms 539, folio 5 verso (canon table 2). The image is reproduced in Der Nersessian, *Armenian Manuscripts in the Walters Art Gallery*, plate 34, fig. 47.

¹² Walters Art Gallery, Ms 539, folios 11 verso and 12 recto; reproduced in Der Nersessian, *Armenian Manuscripts in the Walters Art Gallery*, plates 40-41, 53-54.

¹³ *Ibid.*, plate 78, fig. 121 (Walters Art Gallery, Ms 539, folio 316 verso).

full-length illustration is the donor page, showing a standing Christ with a portrait of Markos the miller kneeling before him (Fig. 10). With no donor page in the Cilician manuscript to copy, Mikayel simply excerpted a full-length Christ from elsewhere in the Roslin manuscript, complete with intricate drapery folds. The figure of Markos is particularly interesting, for it allows us to assess Mikayel as a portrait artist. Noteworthy is the attention to the plain garments of the donor, particularly in comparison with Christ, and his expressive pose of humility.

It is surprising to think this humble figure, a miller by trade, could afford to emulate a royal Cilician manuscript. Sources are unfortunately silent on this question. His epithet "mahtesi" implies that Markos was able to fund a trip to Jerusalem at some point, but we are not told anything else about him, including whether or not he lived in Sebastia. In light of his commission and his travels (and despite his humble garments), it is likely that Markos enjoyed substantial wealth and, as such, reflects a broader socioeconomic trend in medieval Armenia. Already by the thirteenth century, an Armenian merchant class that could afford lavish and prestigious works such as this manuscript had emerged.¹⁴

Given the closeness to the model, it is clear that Markos specifically requested a copy of the Cilician manuscript. The colophons also confirm that he sought permission to use the model before the work was undertaken. All of this emphasizes the great importance and value of the Cilician manuscript as a prized possession of the monastery. In an economic sense, it is comparable to a relic, for the manuscript must have generated a considerable source of income for the foundation that housed it. Through Mikayel's work, one may thus approach the subject of the earning potential of a manuscript and the economics of scriptoria in general, issues yet to be addressed adequately in medieval scholarship, let alone in Armenian art.

With such masterworks as Roslin's at his disposal, Mikayel

¹⁴ Perhaps the best known representative of this new class is the merchant Tigran Honents, whose large and elaborately painted church at Ani testifies to his enormous wealth. See Jean-Michel and Nicole Thierry, *L'Eglise Saint Grégoire de Tigran Honenc à Ani (1215)* (Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 1993).

produced one of the most beautiful manuscripts of his age. In the following centuries, manuscript production fell into decline, as did new building foundations. In many cases, the art of Armenians in Sebastia came to denote objects used rather than produced, such as an early twentieth-century prayer scroll now housed in the Armenian Library and Museum of America (ALMA). Through such portable objects, western iconography reached the lands of Anatolia, as elsewhere. Textiles are equally revealing. Numerous silk shawls and an embroidered and beaded watch case (Fig. 11), also in the ALMA museum, were among those owned and worn by Armenians in Sebastia at the turn of the twentieth century.¹⁵ In their luxurious material and careful manufacture, such objects testify to a relatively wealthy and stable Armenian community at that time. The year 1915 put an end to the Armenian population in Sebastia, and with it any major works of Armenian art and architecture. However, productions such as those of Mikayel may be taken as an elegant reminder of what Armenian Sebastia once was: a place of vigorous economic activity, a major religious center, and a treasury of artistic traditions.

¹⁵ I wish to thank the Armenian Library and Museum of America for permission to photograph these items.

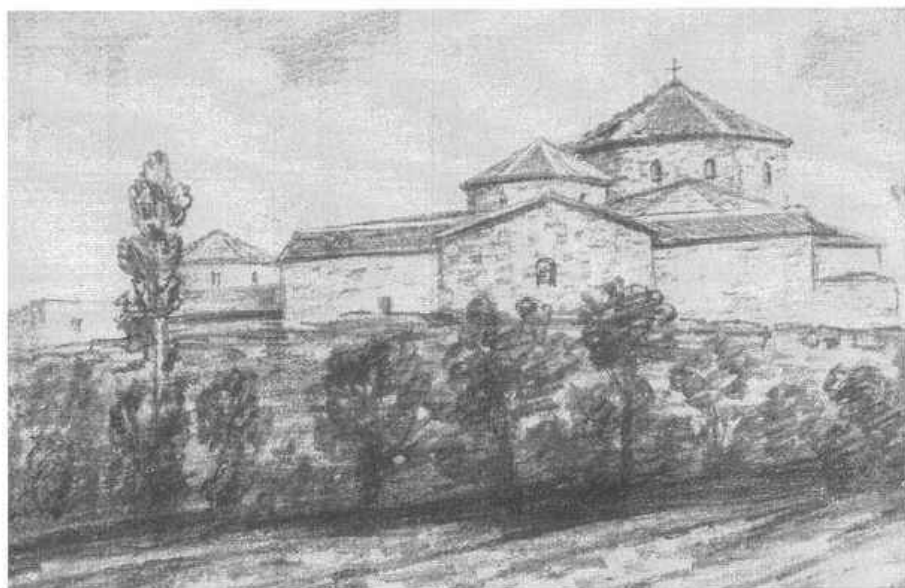


Fig. 1. Surb Nshan: Sketch

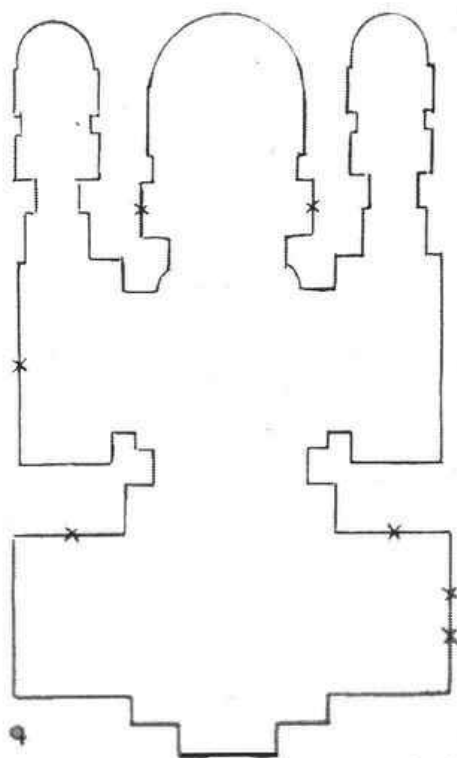


Fig. 2. Surb Nshan: Ground Plan

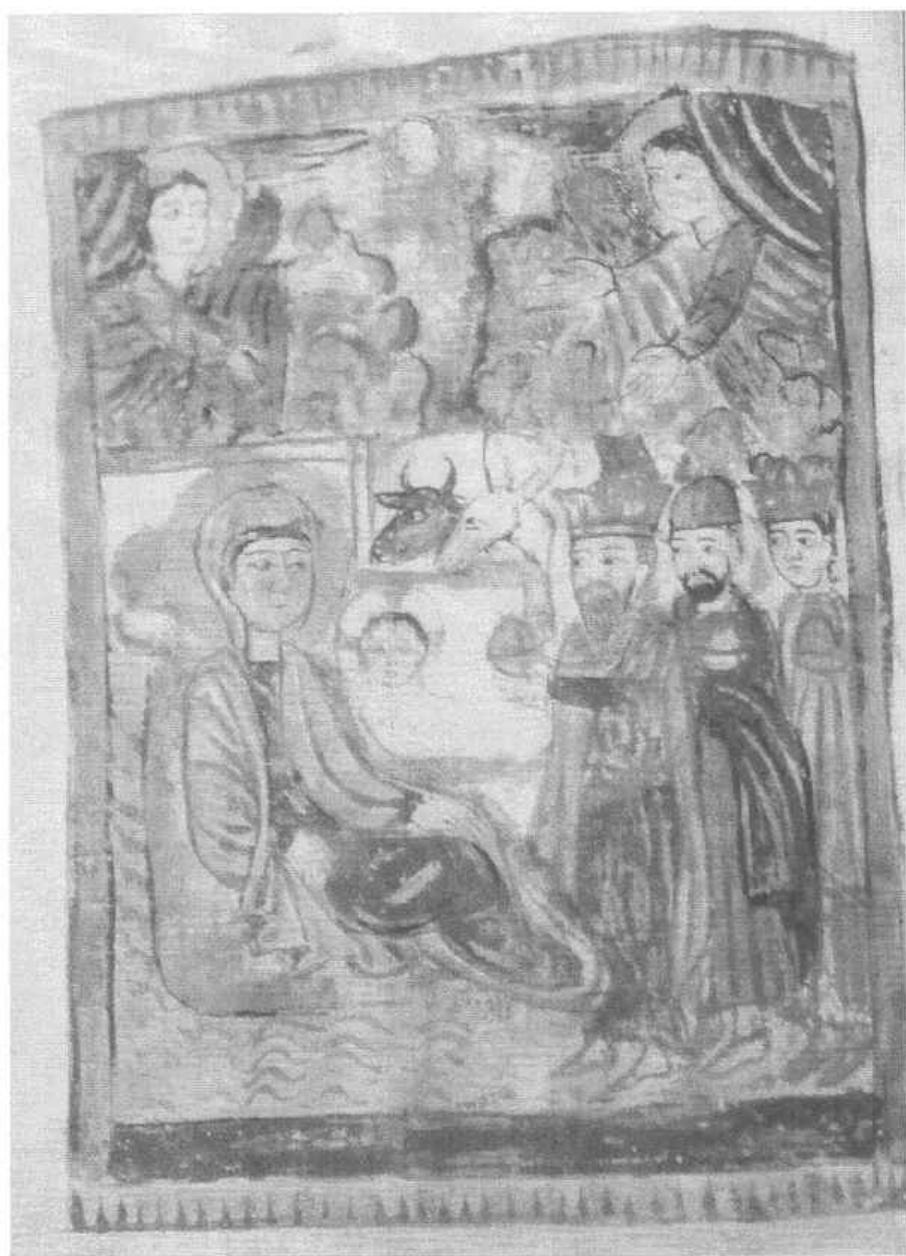


Fig. 3. Four Gospels (Spencer Collection): Nativity



Fig. 4. Four Gospels: Presentation

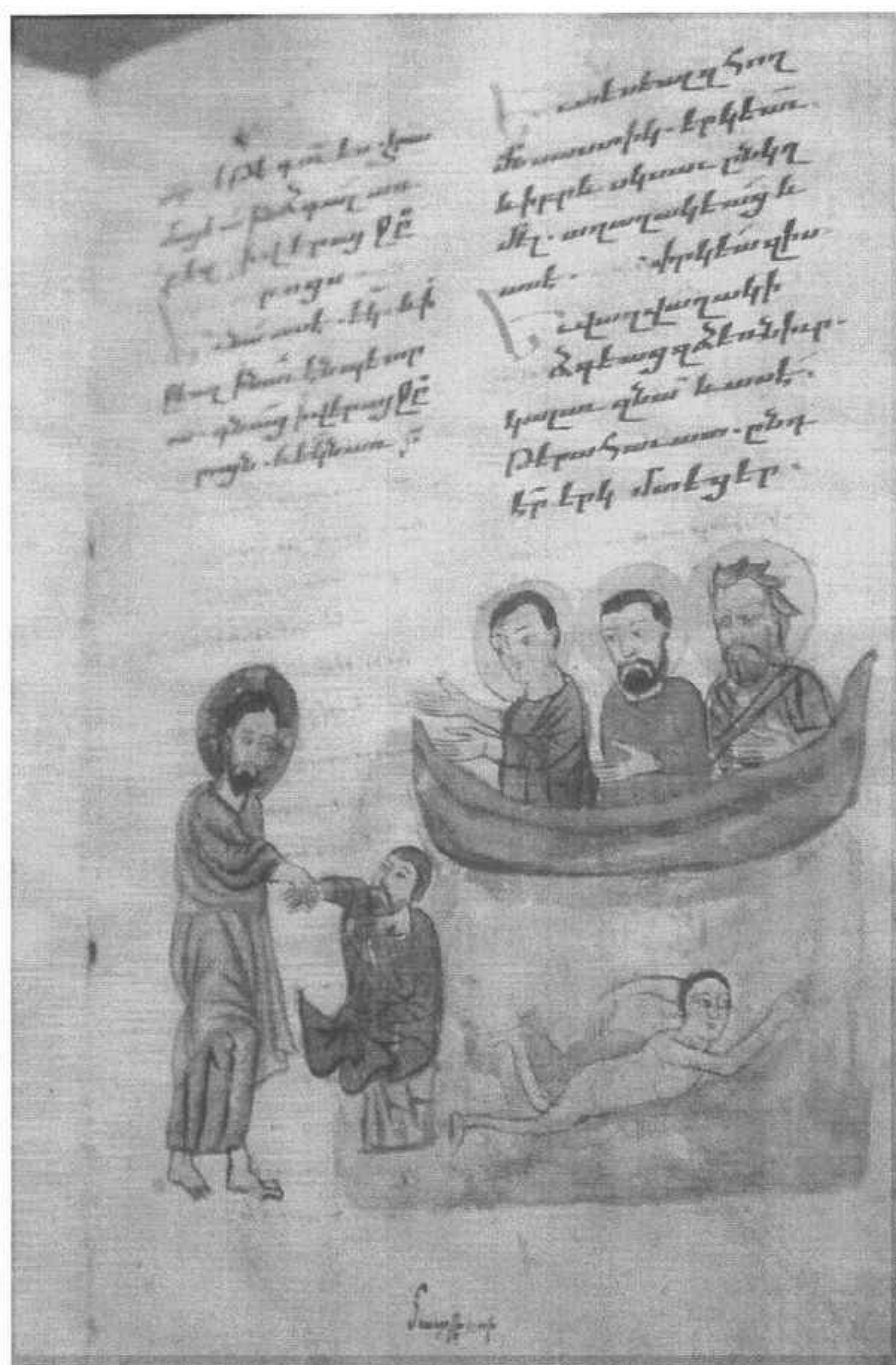


Fig. 5. Four Gospels: Christ Walking on Water



Fig. 6. Gospel Letter of Eusebius to Carpianus

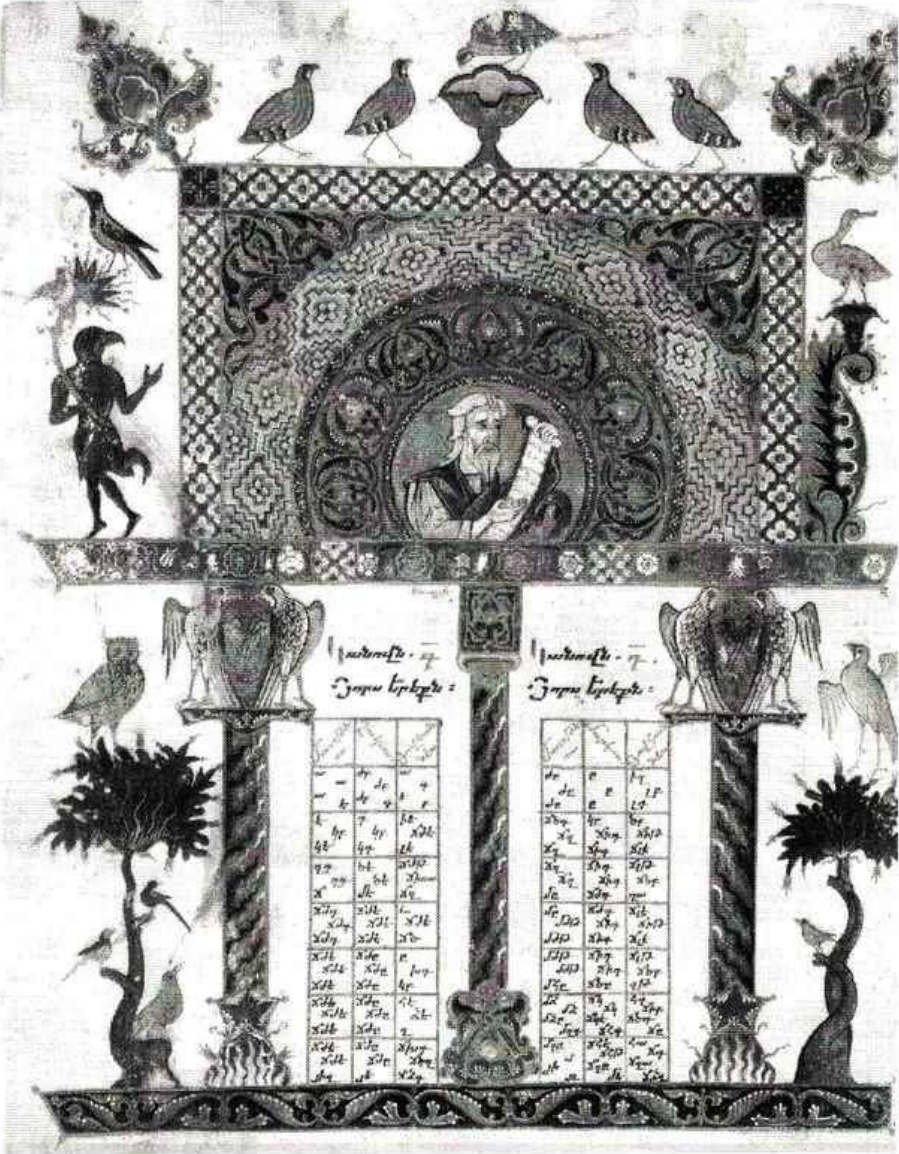


Fig. 7. Gospel: Canon Tables

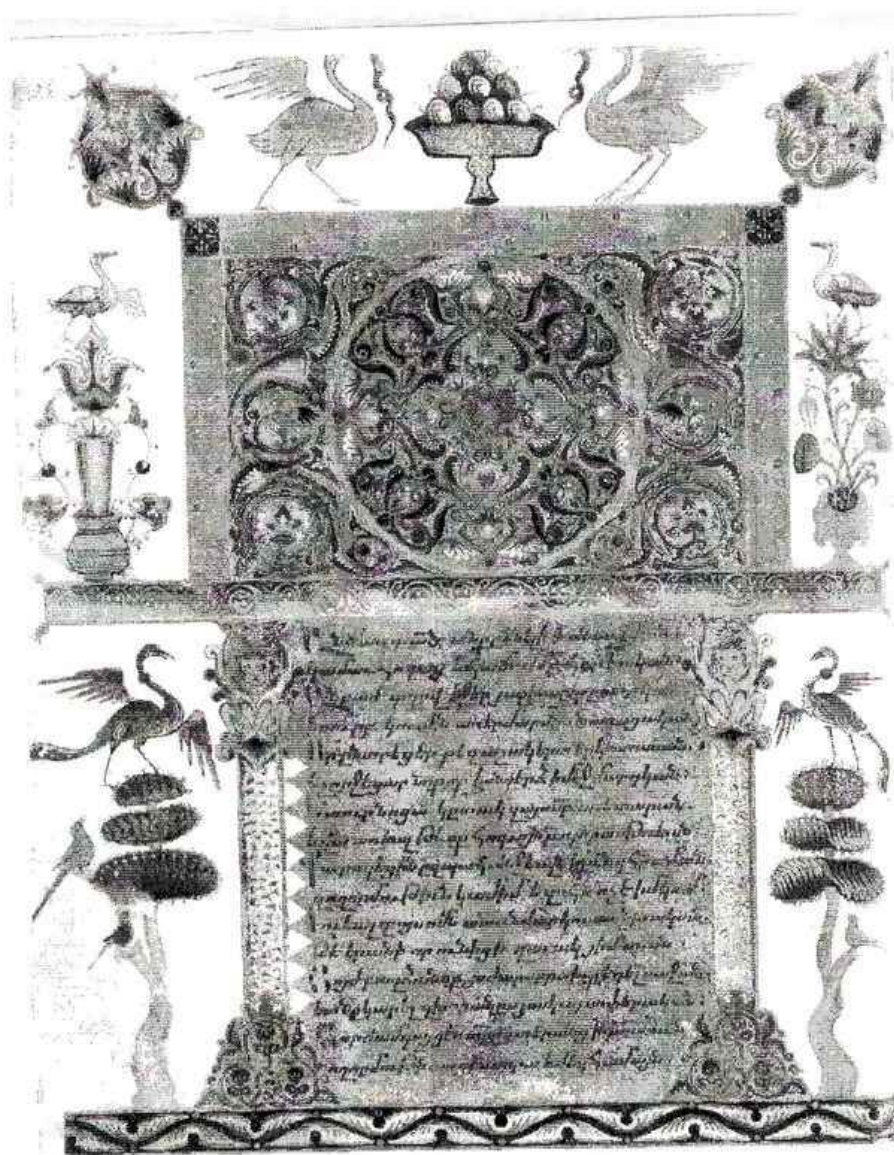


Fig. 8. Gospel: Dedication Page

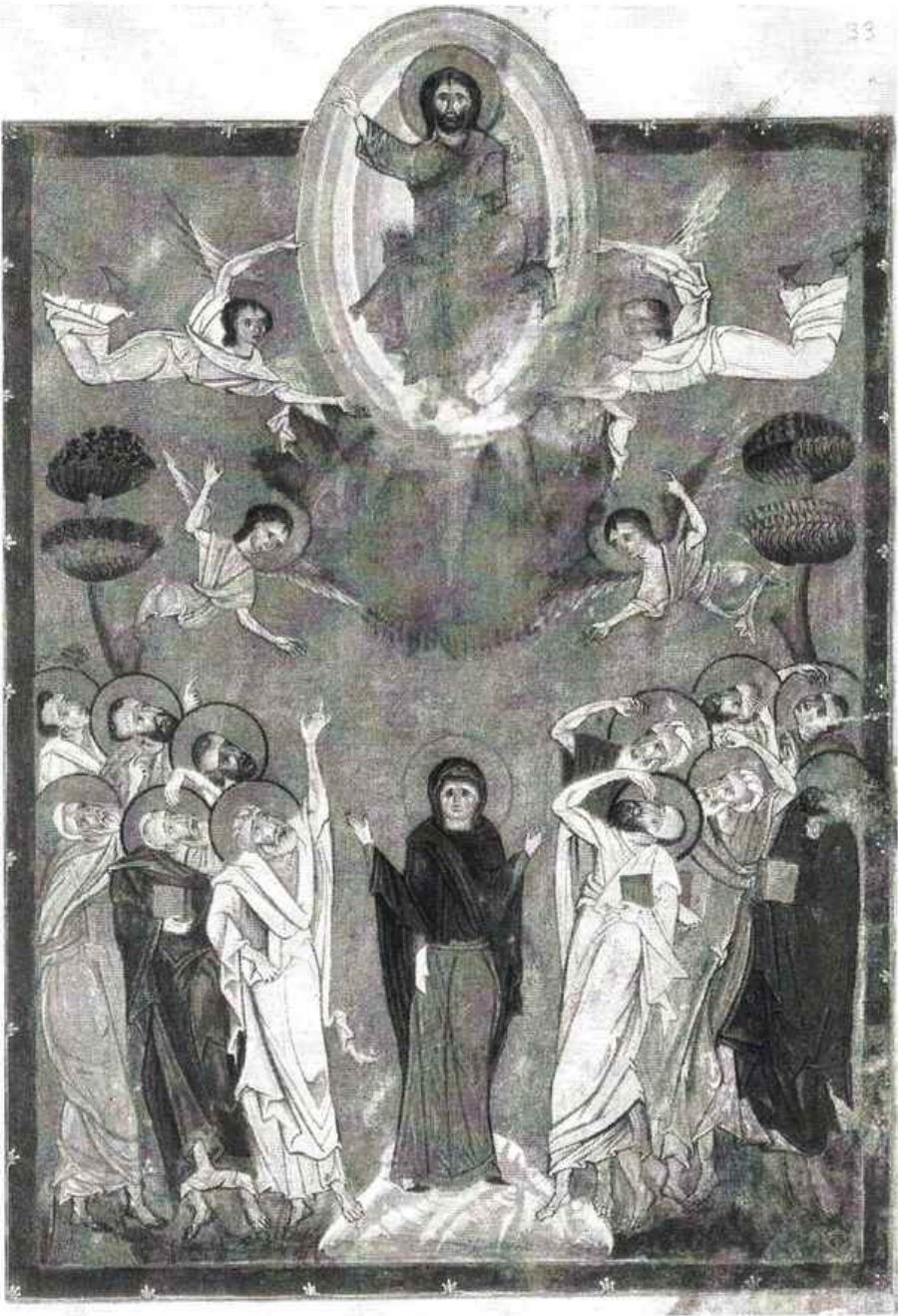


Fig. 9. Gospel: Ascension

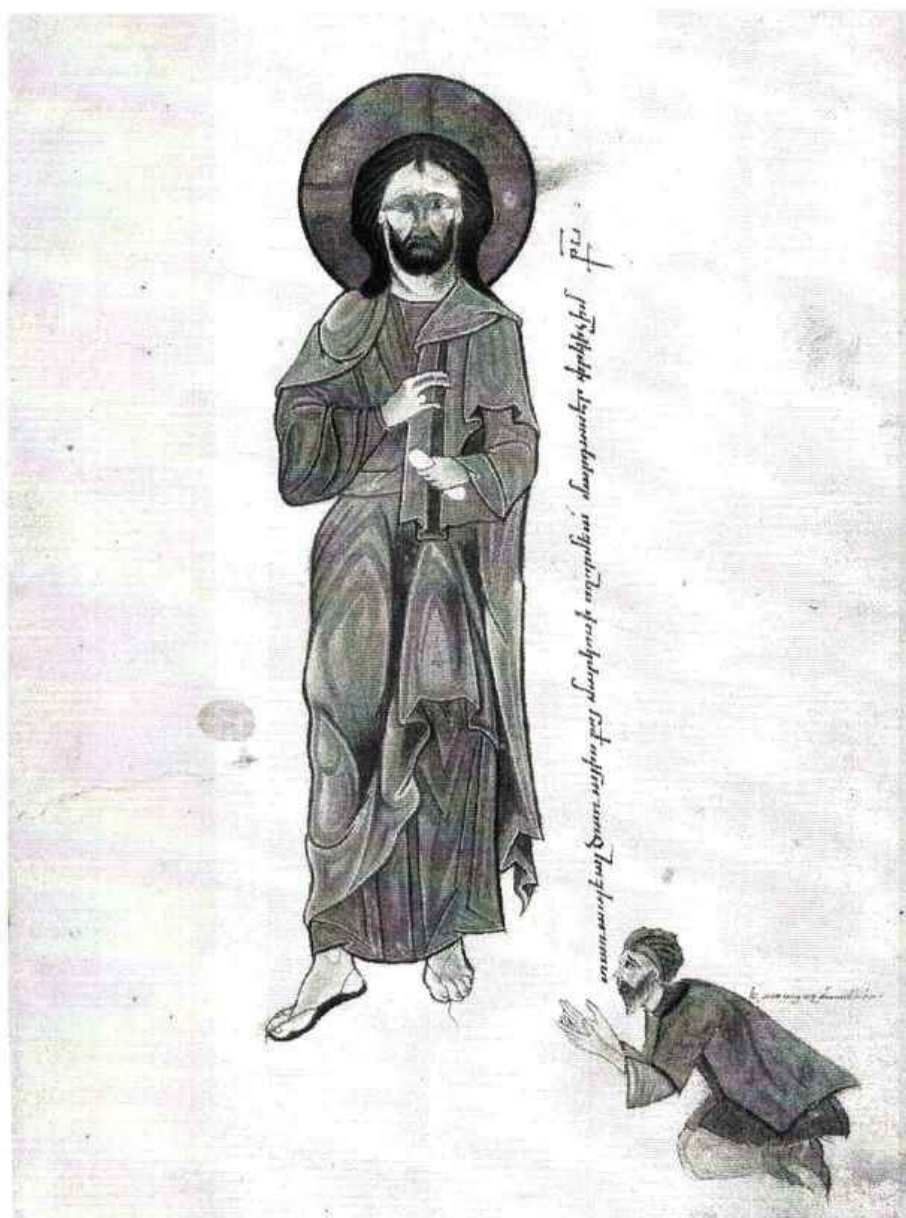


Fig. 10. Gospel: Christ and Donor

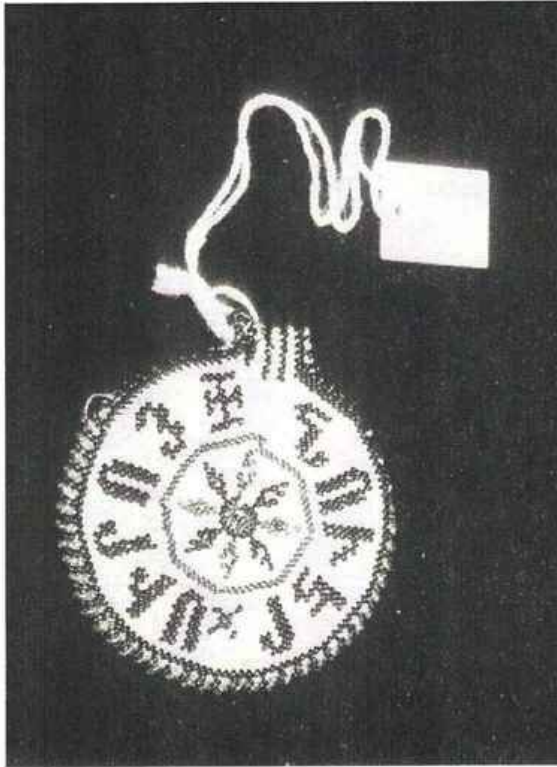


Fig. 11. Embroidered Watch Case,
Sebastia